

Against the Grain

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Blurring Lines — The End of the Open Ed Conference: Who Wins? Who Loses?

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The **Open Ed conference**, after a 16-year run that saw growth familiar to long-run attendees of the **Charleston Conference**, is cancelled. Conference founder, **David Wiley**, made clear in his blog that the flash points and fractures among key constituencies was the reason, not demand, not financial viability and most definitely not need. In a largely measured blog post, **Wiley** avoided calling out any specific interest group, but for four telling words, which I bold in the following quote from the blog post: “Are you primarily focused on reducing costs for students? Improving student success? Increasing pedagogical flexibility for faculty? **Bringing retribution to publishers?**” Bringing retribution to publishers ... In my role at **ProQuest** I sit in a privileged position between publishers and library patrons, seeking to add value, remunerative value, through curation, aggregation, platform tools, services and risk taking on new content types and services. In a prior life I ran a book publishing company and I also served as a teaching assistant at the **University of Arizona**. The idea that a key constituency in the open education movement would have as its driving motivation “...bringing retribution to publishers ...” is concerning. Or, rather, that the founder of the **Open Ed conference** believes this is a driving motivation for many attendees of the conference merits unpacking.

I spent many years with **Pearson Education**, serving as an acquisition editor and ultimately as an editor-in-chief. I participated in revision review meetings, price increase discussions, strategy sessions to discuss “bundling” (the packaging together of a book and access code to a website thus creating a unique ISBN) and many other meetings to steer the business of the publisher. I watched as prices rose and revision cycles increased. At the same time, however, I also participated in uncountable user and faculty research sessions, focus groups and product planning sessions which have as their result huge investments in learning technology and online content delivery. These investments have contributed to the massive growth of online learning facilitated by digital textbooks, learning management systems and adaptive platforms fully informed by the cutting edge of learning science. There is little doubt that decisions were made solely to increase revenue or profits, but this was never done apart from making very large investments in technology and platform. These investments yielded

tools like MyLab for math, which has helped hundreds of thousands of students learn math with an efficiency impossible before technology delivered a solution and saved thousands of teachers time in grading, allowing more time invested with students. The central point I am moving toward with this example from my time at **Pearson** is that it is too simplistic a characterization to label publishers as a source of a problem in higher education — rising material costs — deserving solely of retribution. Moving to a respective corner in a debate amongst a constellation of views, ideas and perspectives and then claiming those with an alternative position are wrong, or bad, or worthy of retribution, is a hallmark of our social and political climate, but not something I would expect to invade the spaces where publishers, teachers, researchers, aggregators, etc. meet.

The primary product I manage is a large aggregation of educational video, Academic Video Online. I have long-stated that Academic Video Online must be the single best site for educators and learners seeking the very best of “for fee” and “for free” educational video. The growth in supply of freely available educational video has been significant: Khan Academy, TED Talks, Brain Pop, etc. Alongside these excellent free resources, there is educational documentary content from **Media Education Foundation**, nursing skills video from **Medcom**, feature film from **Sony Picture Classics** and more. I give over a good portion of each working week to the consideration of business models and access models that will accelerate Academic Video Online’s entry into more universities and community colleges, and I can see no future scenario where the content from most of our providers is freely available. Add to this the significant investment required in research and development to build and improve an academic video platform, let alone sustain the platform and the daily ingestion of content, and the thought that there could be a 100% freely open educational video product is rendered untenable. I, of course, know the argument I am making is not unique and that the mechanisms of alternative funding for open educational content are in their infancy, but how well will we collectively serve faculty and learners if we move to opposite corners of the ring, lift our gloves and begin battering?



The demise of the **Open Ed conference** strikes me as not unlike the demise of the political discourse in the United States, and beyond ... Those who cling fervently to their position — left

or right — “for free” or “for fee” — do so with relative disregard for the 40% or so in the space between who simply want to get the job done. One of my time-worn and tested axioms is that students are looking for the shortest and least expensive line between the first day of class and whatever grade they define as acceptable. Also, faculty are looking for the shortest line between the first day of class and the student course reviews they define as acceptable. The OER purist’s argument that all courseware and content must be free does not satisfy the basic requirement of students and faculty. And the advocates of profit-directed publishing companies who operate solely to improve the topline and bottom-line miss the mark as well in terms of the needs of students and faculty.

The **Charleston Conference** is not without its moments where librarians question the intentions of publishers and service providers. But we come together, year after year, and hear one another and, in doing so, we modify our understanding of one another’s place in solving important problems in discovery and research. Librarians give valuable input into what is needed from industry providers to support researchers and learners, and industry players gain insight into how we must continually evolve our products and our business models. What is better? Separate corners with fists up? Or a marketplace of ideas fiercely defended but respectfully considered? I attended **Open Ed** for the first, and last, time in 2018. I felt and heard the tension between those advocating for open educational resources (OER) to develop apart from influence by publishers and for-profits companies. I also heard language, from both public OER activists and for-profit and non-profit publishers about the importance or reducing cost to students. The end of the **Open Ed conference** is an opportunity lost and those in the middle of the issue will be less well-served as a result. 🌿

Endnotes

1. **David Wiley**, Iterating Toward Openness, pragmatism before zeal, Different Goals, Different Strategies, Blog Post, November 4, 2019.